

## **Commentary Alliances and Dis-alliances between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean**

**by Rafael Hernández**

I have always been struck by the fact that, as far as U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean is concerned, every time a new president arrives at the White House it is as if history began anew. What happened before is alien to him, as if instead of assuming responsibility for a state he represented himself in the way of absolute monarchs. The president never has to explain previous policies, whether the support of military dictatorships or interventions in civil wars, the imposition of immigration measures, trade or environmental practices, covert or financial actions against governments, humanitarian, antidrug, or military-aid missions, weapons sales, psychological warfare, or unilateral military-diplomatic decisions. He never feels compelled to coordinate his actions with those he calls “America’s allies in this hemisphere,” among them actions that involve U.S. alliances with Europe, Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and so on, even though these affect “our hemisphere.” It is as if, every four (or eight) years, the United States disappeared and another country, It is as if, every four (or eight) years, the United States disappeared and another country took its place, a country led by someone whose main concerns, even after taking a tour of the region, are elsewhere.

For Latin Americans the experience is quite different. They cannot help remembering the losses, damages, costs, and aftertastes of the things that have taken place over the past 50 years. At the same time, they do not expect much from the United States. (Or perhaps some of them do: the Chileans, considered among the United States’ closest partners in the region, for example, were actually expecting that, during his recent visit to Santiago, President Obama would apologize for the U.S.-backed overthrow of Salvador Allende in 1973 and for U.S. support for the dictatorship of 1973–1990.) Although he celebrated as exemplary the Brazilian transition from dictatorship to democracy, Brazilians might have been surprised if the president had recognized the U.S. support for the military junta of 1964–1985 and Salvadorans if he had apologized for the prolonging of the atrocious war of 1980–1992. Although it is difficult to make a fresh start, some governments have tried to bury these memories and, with them, their illusions regarding the United States. They welcome the president and talk about partnerships, but they scarcely believe in specific agreements. Most countries do not count on U.S. support in dealing with their internal problems, nor do they look to the North to find a way to international development. They are establishing (or attempting to establish) more trade agreements with China than with the United States and relying more on regional and subregional agreements than on the Inter-American System, the Organization of American States, or the Rio Treaty (Inter-American Reciprocal Assistance Treaty).

### **A BIT OF HISTORY**

This essay can be summarized as follows: (1) Latin America and the Caribbean are not priorities in overall U.S. foreign policy; (2) U.S. policy lacks a coordinated strategy applicable to the whole region; and (3) U.S. relationships with the South of the hemisphere serve particular short-term, country-specific agendas that really reflect not regional or bilateral but global interests. We cannot analyze current intrahemispheric relations without an overview of their evolution over the past 50 years. In the 1960s, Latin America and the Caribbean played a crucial role in the global scope of U.S. policy. After World War II, Europe had displaced it in the structure of its regional economic interests, but the cold war reinforced Latin America’s importance on the geopolitical agenda because of the failed Guatemalan land reform of 1954 and, especially, the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The 1961 Alliance for Progress proposed a reformist alternative to the threat of “other

Cubans” in the hemisphere. The expectation that social-democratic policies would “contain communism” in Latin America proved wishful thinking; counterinsurgency prevailed over reformism. Instead of development aid, poverty reduction, land reform, and populist governments, the region was flooded with military regimes that violently ended revolutionary attempts and eliminated every vestige of democracy, the rule of law, and social development. In the few countries where the armed forces and the far right did not seize control of the state, reforms faded from the public agenda under the party-cratic reign of Demo-Christian and Social Democratic regimes.

While dictatorships swallowed democracies, U.S. attention shifted away from the region toward other areas of the globe. During Johnson’s term (1964– 1968), the United States gradually abandoned Latin America and the Caribbean to focus on Southeast Asia. Although U.S. troops invaded the Dominican Republic the same year that they landed in Vietnam, the United States lost interest in articulating the policy toward the whole region that the New Frontier group had envisioned. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger paid much attention to it. Except for the short span of the Carter administration, the region increasingly lost importance in global U.S. foreign policy. President Jimmy Carter (1977–1980) was less successful in changing this pattern than was initially expected. A commission of prominent figures led by Sol Linowitz had traveled through Latin America and the Caribbean in 1974 and 1976 and issued a report that some took as the basis for a new U.S. Latin American policy. The new agenda for the region, according to the Linowitz Commission, included two “test cases”: the Panama Canal and Cuba (Hernández, 2009). A relatively favorable domestic and international situation, as well as the determination of the Panamanian president, General Omar Torrijos, allowed the Carter administration to achieve a new Canal treaty. There was also some progress with Cuba, and dialogue was established, particularly in 1977–1979, but there were no permanent results that modified the structure of the bilateral conflict.

The Central American wars of 1980–1992 came to an end through negotiated agreements from 1990 to 1992 that coincided with the end of the cold war. More than 20 years after the end of that conflict and the beginning of a process of national reconstruction, the results are thin. Central American economies rely on a financial sector controlled by foreign banks and a fragmented national community with vast displaced population segments currently residing in the central nations, especially the United States. U.S. military bases established back then continue to play an active political role, as was demonstrated during the crisis in Honduras in 2010. Beneath the fragile democracies of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the wounds of that conflict left scarred and traumatized societies plagued by marginalization, violence, instability, and fear. Political calls for “iron-hand” control over gangs have been as ineffective in San Salvador as in Los Angeles.

With the disappearance of the “communist threat,” migration, drug trafficking, and organized crime, along with democratic interventions (in Panama in 1989, in Haiti in 1994) became the focus of the U.S. agenda; they were approached not as economic problems but as “security issues.”

#### **“FORGING NEW ALLIANCES FOR PROGRESS IN LATIN AMERICA”**

The fact is that, nowadays, the United States is far less able, in its political instruments as well as in terms of internal political consensus, to deal with Latin American problems than it was during the cold war era. Poverty, inequality, undocumented migration, growing crime, public insecurity, and the civil wars brought about by drug trafficking and military campaigns attempting to end it are no longer limited to a handful of countries as they were in the 1980s. Although most of the region (“including” Honduras and “excluding” Cuba) has elected governments in multiparty

elections and only Colombia has an ongoing armed conflict, insecurity has proliferated throughout Central America and has expanded to numerous cities in Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Andean region (see Temas, 2010). The military defeat of drug trafficking and organized crime is nowhere in sight, and, what is more, the problem has reemerged and crossed national borders. Flows of undocumented migration are growing and becoming increasingly diversified. Free-trade agreements with the United States, instead of being the salvation of precarious economies, have rewarded larger ones or those with projected sustained growth. Climate change, a topic barely mentioned during the cold war, has become a divisive issue on the North-South intrahemispheric agenda.

Latin America, including Cuba, is still a minor topic on the U.S. global policy agenda, one that cannot be compared with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the conflict with Iran, the trade, military/strategic, and climate tensions involving China and Russia, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to say nothing of the global economic crisis, currency instability, complications involving military alliances and disagreements with Europe, and U.S. domestic problems, such as high unemployment rates and problems in the real estate market. In addition to all this, instability in North Africa and the intervention in Libya, which coincided with Obama's tour of Latin America, show that not even the armed conflict in Colombia takes precedence over these other issues. Latin America and the Caribbean are not on the radar of U.S. policy as a whole but only as particular nations that directly affect or threaten U.S. interests. These interests include the following: undocumented migration (Mexico, Central America, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Colombia, Cuba), drugs (Mexico, Colombia, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Central America), foreign trade (Mexico, Chile, Brazil), instability or democratic interventionism (Haiti, Honduras), the emergence of leftist governments (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua), oil (Venezuela, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil), and armed conflict (Colombia). In fact, most of these "hemispheric issues" are "global," but U.S. policy does not treat them as such.

U.S. policy regarding global issues such as the military intervention in Libya and the reaction to it of Latin American governments illustrate the new dynamics of intrahemispheric relations in contrast to the years of the Alliance for Progress. Obama's keynote address during his recent visit to Brazil was really intended not to restore any alliance for progress but to explain the bombing of Libya: "When men and women peacefully claim their human rights, our own common humanity itself is enhanced" (Agencia EFE, 2011). Despite Brazil's express interest in occupying a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, it abstained from the council vote on Libya while other governments in the region, including Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Nicaragua, and Cuba, openly condemned the attack. Only Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Panama approved.

President Obama called his Latin American policy an "alliance of equals." As for both Brazil and Chile, he said that this was a question not of "a senior partner and a minor one" but of "equal partners united in mutual interest and respect" (Abramovich, 2011). From President Rousseff's viewpoint, however, the goal is establishing more balanced and fair economic relations and bringing down trade barriers that obstruct Brazilian products such as ethanol, beef, cotton, orange juice, and steel.

If we consider the list of topics relevant to the United States in relation to the sequence of countries scheduled in Obama's tour and the time invested, we can conclude the following: 1. His agenda is dominated by trade relations and economic interests involving regional powers and includes only those regional socioeconomic problems that directly affect U.S. security: organized crime, drugs, instability, and migration. 2. Brazil and Chile are the success stories that other countries should attend to. These nations have "centrist" governments, unlike leftist Venezuela,

Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Their economic policies should serve as an example given that they have led to spectacular growth.<sup>3</sup> El Salvador is the opposite, being more dependent on the United States than most other nations in the region because of its internal problems almost 20 years after the end of armed conflict and the way it has restructured its ties with the North. The visit is an opportunity to show generosity to a disadvantaged democracy.<sup>4</sup> The unifying rhetorical theme for the various countries visited is the assessment of democratic transitions as a formula for progress and regional stability. This speech seems to have more to do with what is happening in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia than with any real, consistent U.S. policy for Latin America. It ignores the aforementioned U.S. responsibility for the overthrow of elected presidents João Goulart and Salvador Allende, the legitimation of the subsequent dictatorial regimes, and the armed conflict in El Salvador, as well as this administration's ambiguous behavior with regard to the 2010 Honduran coup.

Despite its eloquence, the discourse on the "alliance of equals" cannot disguise the major differences between these countries and the United States or between present circumstances and the days of the Alliance for Progress. Let us consider just two issues: First, the nations taken as a model have as their major trading partners not the United States but other "extrahemispheric" powers, especially China. The United States highlights and presents them as paradigms when it is less important to them than ever before. While the relationship with Chile is exceptional in the region because of its mutually beneficial nature and the virtual absence of friction regarding international affairs, Brazil's foreign policies—for example, its treatment of Venezuela and Cuba, the U.S.-Colombian military agreement, the situation in Honduras, policy with regard to Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the criteria used to condemn other countries as violators of human rights and democracy—have often been at odds with those of the United States (Hakim, 2011). Although Obama said in Brasilia that it was high time that the United States treated its economic operations in Brazil with the same seriousness as its dealings with India and China, no analyst seriously believes that the two are going to sign similar technology and nuclear cooperation agreements. From the U.S. perspective, the two Asian giants (which have long possessed nuclear weapons and are in the vicinity of Central Asia and the Middle East) are not just geo-economically but also geo-strategically more important in terms of global priorities than even a medium-sized power as formidable as Brazil. Where, then, must the rest of Latin American and the Caribbean rank in the U.S. hierarchy?

Second, Central America does not enjoy the same prosperity as Chile in spite of the advantages provided by its free-trade agreements with the United States. The current U.S.-Salvadoran policy seems to be a typical Alliance for Progress scenario—an aid package consisting of a fund to combat poverty and the training of a specialized force in the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking. If the model for development is Chile, Mexico is probably the model for coping with organized violence. However, the United States has not been able to stop drug trafficking and arms smuggling in Mexico, even though it has more than 2,000 kilometers of border controlled and fortified by the most sophisticated means and a sizable military force specially trained for police work and patrolling on both sides of it. Can the United States guarantee Central American nations, including Costa Rica, effective help in controlling gangs and drug trafficking networks in a regional context characterized by high levels of poverty, ineffective armies and police forces, an abundance of weapons, and a violence-saturated culture? Could the U.S. president, with a Republican Congress, even offer these countries the legalization of nearly 1 million undocumented immigrants whose remittances are essential to the survival of their dependents, to say nothing of greater opportunities for migration? Finally, a brief comment on Cuba, considered as an issue within this real hemispheric context. Paradoxically, Cuba has advanced more than most countries in the region with regard to the sensitive area of U.S. national security. In fact, Cubans have been more reliable partners

regarding coordinated migration and anti-drug trafficking policies than the other governments and armies in the region; the U.S. armed forces, the Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the Coast Guard can all attest to this. At the same time, Obama has reaffirmed that free trade is a central part of U.S. policy in the hemisphere. During his visit to India last year he said that “only Indians can determine India’s national interests”. If he were to apply these statements to Cuba as part of his global policy, he would lift the embargo and begin a new phase of relations with the island.

In short, a change in relations with Cuba would be more consistent and practical, in terms of the stated U.S. national and global interests, than with other countries in the region; it would also send signals of goodwill to the rest of the hemisphere on a subject on which there is widespread consensus from Mexico to Chile. If they could, the creators of the Alliance for Progress would probably endorse this suggestion.

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